

AP World History Historical Thinking Skills and Themes

Historical Thinking Skills

Overview

These skills apply equally to all fields of history.

Skill 1: Crafting Historical Arguments from Historical Evidence

Components

Historical argumentation

Historical thinking involves the ability to define and frame a question about the past and to address that question by constructing an argument. A plausible and persuasive argument requires a clear, comprehensive and analytical thesis, supported by relevant historical evidence—not simply evidence that supports a preferred or preconceived position. Additionally, argumentation involves the capacity to describe, analyze and evaluate the arguments of others in light of available evidence.

Appropriate use of relevant historical evidence

Historical thinking involves the ability to identify, describe and evaluate evidence about the past from diverse sources (including written documents, works of art, archaeological artifacts, oral traditions and other primary sources), with respect to content, authorship, purpose, format and audience. It involves the capacity to extract useful information, make supportable inferences and draw appropriate conclusions from historical evidence while also understanding such evidence in its context, recognizing its limitations and assessing the points of view that it reflects.

Skill 2: Chronological Reasoning

Components

Historical causation

Historical thinking involves the ability to identify, analyze and evaluate multiple cause-and-effect relationships in a historical context, distinguishing between the long-term and proximate.

Patterns of continuity and change over time

Historical thinking involves the ability to recognize, analyze and evaluate the dynamics of historical continuity and change over periods of time of varying lengths, as well as relating these patterns to larger historical processes or themes.

Periodization

Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, analyze, evaluate and construct models of historical periodization that historians use to categorize events into discrete blocks and to identify turning points, recognizing that the choice of specific dates favors one narrative, region or group over another narrative, region or group; therefore, changing the periodization can change a historical narrative. Moreover, the particular circumstances and contexts in which individual historians work and write shape their interpretations and modeling of past events.

Skill 3: Comparison and Contextualization Components

Comparison

Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, compare and evaluate multiple historical developments within one society, one or more developments across or between different societies, and in various chronological and geographical contexts. It also involves the ability to identify, compare and evaluate multiple perspectives on a given historical experience.

Contextualization

Historical thinking involves the ability to connect historical developments to specific circumstances in time and place, and to broader regional, national or global processes.

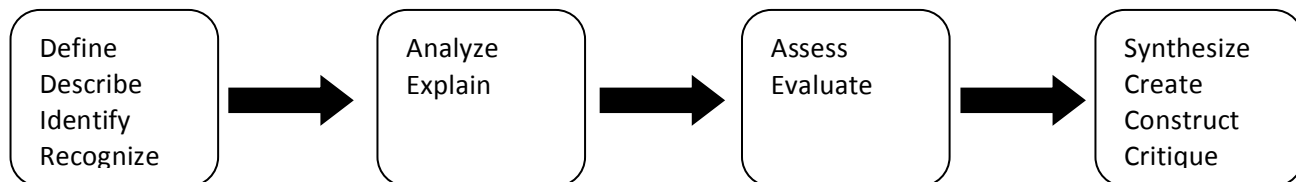
Skill 4: Historical Interpretation and Synthesis Components

Interpretation

Historical thinking involves the ability to describe, analyze, evaluate and create diverse interpretations of the past — as revealed through primary and secondary historical sources — through analysis of evidence, reasoning, contexts, points of view and frames of reference.

Synthesis

Historical thinking involves the ability to arrive at meaningful and persuasive understandings of the past by applying all the other historical thinking skills, by drawing appropriately on ideas from different fields of inquiry or disciplines, and by creatively fusing disparate, relevant (and perhaps contradictory) evidence from primary sources and secondary works. Additionally, synthesis may involve applying insights about the past to other historical contexts or circumstances, including the present.



Historical Themes in AP World History

Theme 1: Interaction Between Humans and the Environment

- Demography and disease
- Migration
- Patterns of settlement
- Technology

The interaction between humans and the environment is a fundamental theme for world history. The environment shaped human societies, but, increasingly, human societies also affected the environment. During prehistory, humans interacted with the environment as hunters, fishers and foragers, and human migrations led to the peopling of the earth. As the Neolithic revolution began, humans exploited their environments more intensively, either as farmers or pastoralists. Environmental factors such as rainfall patterns, climate, and available flora and fauna shaped the methods of exploitation used in different regions. Human exploitation of the environment intensified as populations grew and as people migrated into new

regions. As people flocked into cities or established trade networks, new diseases emerged and spread, sometimes devastating an entire region.

During the Industrial Revolution, environmental exploitation increased exponentially. In recent centuries, human effects on the environment — and the ability to master and exploit it — increased with the development of more sophisticated technologies, the exploitation of new energy sources and a rapid increase in human populations. By the twentieth century, large numbers of humans had begun to recognize their effect on the environment and took steps toward a “green” movement to protect and work with the natural world instead of exploiting it.

Theme 2: Development and Interaction of Cultures

- Religions
- Belief systems, philosophies, and ideologies
- Science and technology
- The arts and architecture

This theme explores the origins, uses, dissemination, and adaptation of ideas, beliefs, and knowledge within and between societies. Studying the dominant belief system(s) or religions, philosophical interests, and technical and artistic approaches can reveal how major groups in society view themselves and others, and how they respond to multiple challenges.

When people of different societies interact, they often share components of their cultures, deliberately or not. The processes of adopting or adapting new belief and knowledge systems are complex and often lead to historically novel cultural blends. A society’s culture may be investigated and compared with other societies’ cultures as a way to reveal both what is unique to a culture and what it shares with other cultures. It is also possible to analyze and trace particular cultural trends or ideas across human societies.

Theme 3: State-Building, Expansion, and Conflict

- Political structures and forms of governance Empires
- Nations and nationalism
- Revolts and revolutions
- Regional, transregional, and global structures and organizations

This theme refers to the processes by which hierarchical systems of rule have been constructed and maintained and to the conflicts generated through those processes. In particular, this theme encourages the comparative study of different state forms (for example, kingdoms, empires, nation-states) across time and space, and the interactions among them. Continuity and change are also embedded in this theme through attention to the organizational and cultural foundations of long-term stability on one hand, and to internal and external causes of conflict on the other. Students should examine and compare various forms of state development and expansion in the context of various productive strategies (for example, agrarian, pastoral, mercantile), various cultural and ideological foundations (for example, religions, philosophies, ideas of nationalism), various social and gender structures, and in different environmental contexts. This theme also discusses different types of states, such as autocracies and constitutional democracies. Finally, this theme encourages students to explore interstate relations, including warfare, diplomacy, commercial and cultural exchange, and the formation of international organizations.

Theme 4: Creation, Expansion, and Interaction of Economic Systems

- Agricultural and pastoral production
- Trade and commerce
- Labor systems
- Industrialization
- Capitalism and socialism

This theme surveys the diverse patterns and systems that human societies have developed as they exploit their environments to produce, distribute, and consume desired goods and services across time and space. It stresses major transitions in human economic activity, such as the growth and spread of agricultural, pastoral, and industrial production; the development of various labor systems associated with these economic systems (including different forms of household management and the use of coerced or free labor); and the ideologies, values, and institutions (such as capitalism and socialism) that sustained them. This theme also calls attention to patterns of trade and commerce between various societies, with particular attention to the relationship between regional and global networks of communication and exchange, and their effects on economic growth and decline. These webs of interaction strongly influence cultural and technological diffusion, migration, state formation, social classes, and human interaction with the environment.

Theme 5: Development and Transformation of Social Structures

- Gender roles and relations
- Family and kinship
- Racial and ethnic constructions
- Social and economic classes

This theme is about relations among human beings. All human societies develop ways of grouping their members, as well as norms that govern interactions between individuals and social groups. Social stratification comprises distinctions based on kinship systems, ethnic associations, and hierarchies of gender, race, wealth, and class. The study of world history requires analysis of the processes through which social categories, roles, and practices were created, maintained, and transformed. It also involves analysis of the connections between changes in social structures and other historical shifts, especially trends in political economy, cultural expression, and human ecology.